

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Joseph W. Thompson
1822-1891

Each year thousands visit Norlands, the Washburn family estate at Livermore. Among its attractions is the impressive Victorian home which Israel Washburn Sr.'s sons built for him in his old age. Not only is this house important for its family associations, but also as the last remaining work of a major mid-nineteenth century Maine architect and builder, Joseph W. Thompson of Stockton Springs.

Born in rural Montville on May 11, 1822, Thompson came to coastal Stockton Springs in 1848. There he married Ursula Biather, the daughter of Arthur J. Biather, a prominent local builder. Both histories of Stockton Springs note that Thompson built many local residences as well as several summer cottages at nearby Fort Point, but regrettably, these accounts fail to name them specifically.¹ As his reputation grew, he gained work in Portland and in St. John, New Brunswick. His career was marked by a versatility which ranged from providing finish work for the cabin of the Ship Garibaldi of Belfast in 1860 to making coffins as part of his undertaking business.²

In addition to his professional activities, Joseph W. Thompson served his adopted community of Stockton Springs as a Justice of the Peace, a master of the

Masonic Lodge, a selectman, and a representative to the State Legislature. It is in this latter capacity that he may have come to the attention of the Washburn family. Thompson was elected to the House of Representatives in the fall of 1860 and served his first term during the governorship of Israel Washburn, Jr. He was elected for another legislative term in the fall of 1864.

The following year the Washburn family decided to enlarge and remodel "Boyscroft", their story-and-a-half Greek Revival house of 1843. George M. Harding of Portland was engaged to design the changes, and he presented a plan in November, 1865.³ Some construction was started in 1866, but most of the project was carried out in the first half of 1867. Joseph Thompson was initially hired as the Washburns' supervisor, but his role quickly expanded. He visited Livermore in September, 1866 to discuss the work and returned in January, 1867 to make drawings and specifications. Whether Harding's plans were discarded or used at least in part by Thompson is unclear. On May 16, 1867, he and his six man crew arrived to begin building. The use of the then popular French or mansard roof on part of the house is indicated in a Norlands Journal entry of June 5, 1867, which observed that "The crew is pressing on with the french business and have the roof on..."

Then on June 29th of that year the house was completely destroyed by fire. The Journal reported that at two o'clock in the afternoon it "took fire and burned to the ground in less than two brief hours (what we had been two years in enlarging and adorning) like a pageant and literally left not a wreck behind."

The Washburn family immediately turned to Joseph W. Thompson and his men to create a new home on the site of the earlier one. On the same day as the fire, Thompson drafted plans for the present house. His design was for a dignified Italian style residence of rectangular shape to stand two stories high with a hip roof broken on the facade by a central gable (Figure 1). The first story was to be surrounded on the north, south and west sides by a veranda with an ell and barn connecting on the east side. Thompson may have derived the design of the main house from Design XXVI in Andrew Jackson Downing's popular book *The Architecture of Country*



Figure 1. Israel Washburn, Sr., House, Norlands, Livermore, c. 1870 (Photo MHPC).

Houses first published in New York in 1850 (Figure 2). Design XXVI shows "A small Country-House for the Southern States." While the plate may have served as Thompson's basic inspiration, he enlarged the length of the house from three bays to five and added more elaborate details. With some modifications, Thompson may have also followed Downing's symmetrical first and second floor plans, which called for central hallways with rooms at either side. Thompson may also have derived some of his exterior details from such manuals as *Designs for Street Fronts, Suburban Houses and Cottages* by Marcus F. Cummings, Troy, New York, 1865. Figure 1 of Plate 35 of this publication shows the design for a veranda almost identical to the one which surrounds the main house.

Not a moment was lost by the Washburns in replacing "Boyscroft". On the day of the fire, while Joseph Thompson was drawing new plans, his men were sent into the woods to cut hemlock for the project. The house frame went up in early July, and the barn frame quickly followed. The work continued through the summer, but in the early fall the family became concerned that it would not be completed

by winter. The following Journal notations reflect this state of events and what actions were taken to remedy it:

September 15, 1867. The house is progressing but more men are wanted from England or elsewhere —Those here are not sufficient in numbers to do what must be secured before snow fall.

September 16, 1867. Mr. White went to Augusta today to hunt up more Carpenters and Thompson and me are going to North Turner.

October 3, 1867. The crew is increased to 24 carpenters, 5 masons, 1 tender, 2 men in the cellar besides Mr. White and Johnson. We shall have a big pay roll for Oct. I hope we shall have a big amount of work.

November 5, 1867. In such a pile of buildings as Mr. Thompson is superintending here there is an immense amount of work. The work drags but is well and prudently managed.

By late November the basic work of constructing the house, ell, and barn were completed, and Thompson and his men returned home.

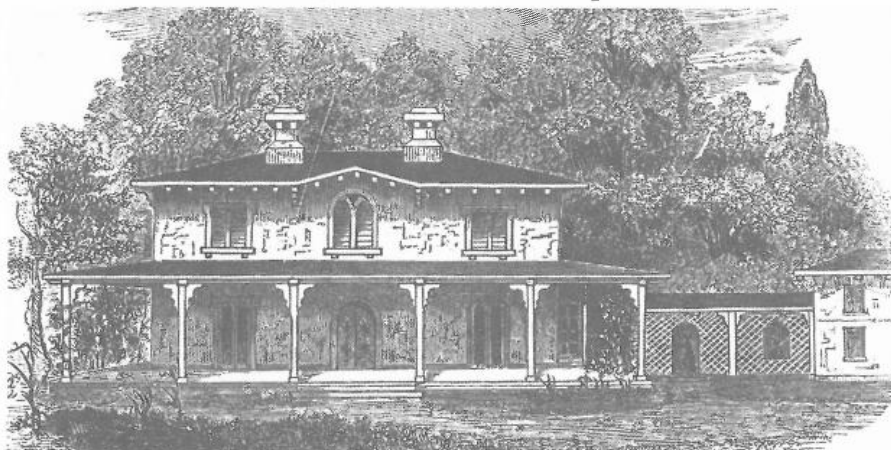


Figure 2. Design XXVI from *The Architecture of Country Houses* by Andrew Jackson Downing, New York, 1850.

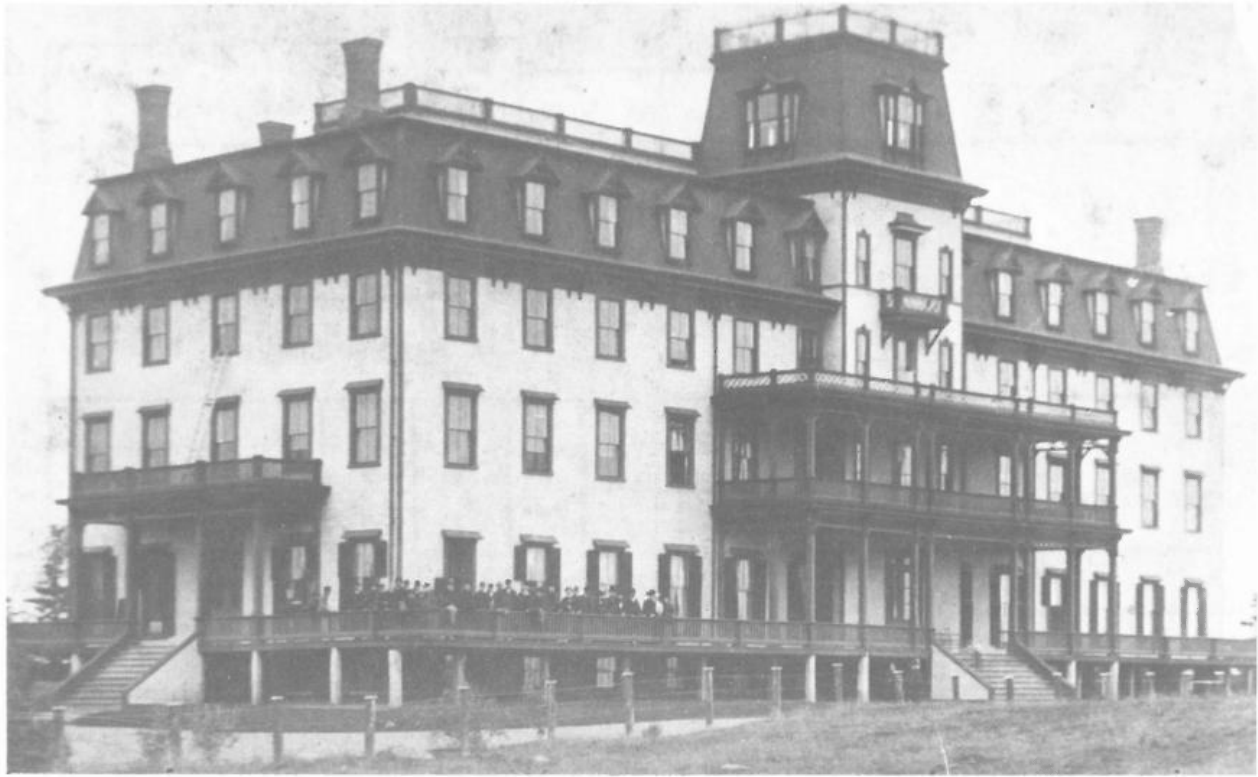


Figure 3. Wassaumkeag Hotel, Fort Point, Stockton Springs, c. 1880 (Photo MHPC).

In 1871 Captain Charles Sanford and Hugh Ross of Bangor commissioned Joseph W. Thompson to design and build the Wassaumkeag Hotel at Fort Point.⁴ Sanford and Ross formed a stock company which raised \$85,000 to finance the project. Laying of the granite foundation began in March, and the huge wooden frame was brought down the Penobscot River from Bangor the following month. Construction moved rapidly to meet a July 1st opening deadline, but some finishing touches continued during the season.

When completed, the Wassaumkeag reflected the large scale frame construction and Mansard style of many of Maine's post Civil War resort hotels (Figures 3, 4). The *Bangor Whig and Courier* offered the following praise for the new building and its surroundings:

The site is a very commanding situation, from which a magnificent view can be obtained in all directions. The spacious grounds will be elegantly laid out in lawns, etc., with trees and shrubbery, while walks and drives will render every part of them accessible. A new wharf, at which steamers will stop on every trip, furnishes a landing place, whence a winding driveway will lead to the hotel. The main building will be 150 feet long by 50 feet wide, three stories high with a Mansard roof, which

is equivalent to another story. A large tower rises in the center of the facade, and the front and ends will be furnished with balconies. The roof will be railed and finished as a promenade. The interior will contain 100 rooms and will be furnished with all the best modern appliances for the comfort of the guests. We confidently predict an immense patronage for this new summer resort, and its easy access from this city will no doubt draw to it most of our citizens who have heretofore spent the summer months in other places.⁵

During the ensuing quarter century, the Wassaumkeag was known variously as the Fort Point House and the Woodcliff. It shared the fate of the vast majority of its contemporaries by burning to the ground on the eve of its twenty-seventh season in 1898.

Joseph W. Thompson did not live to see the destruction of his Wassaumkeag Hotel. After a career of more than four decades, he suffered a prolonged illness which took his life at Fort Point on January 27, 1891. The *Belfast Republican Journal* paid tribute to him as a man who "endeared himself to his friends. His cheerful voice, generous nature, his ready sympathy will long be remembered, and in trouble what a friend..."⁶

Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr.
January, 1985

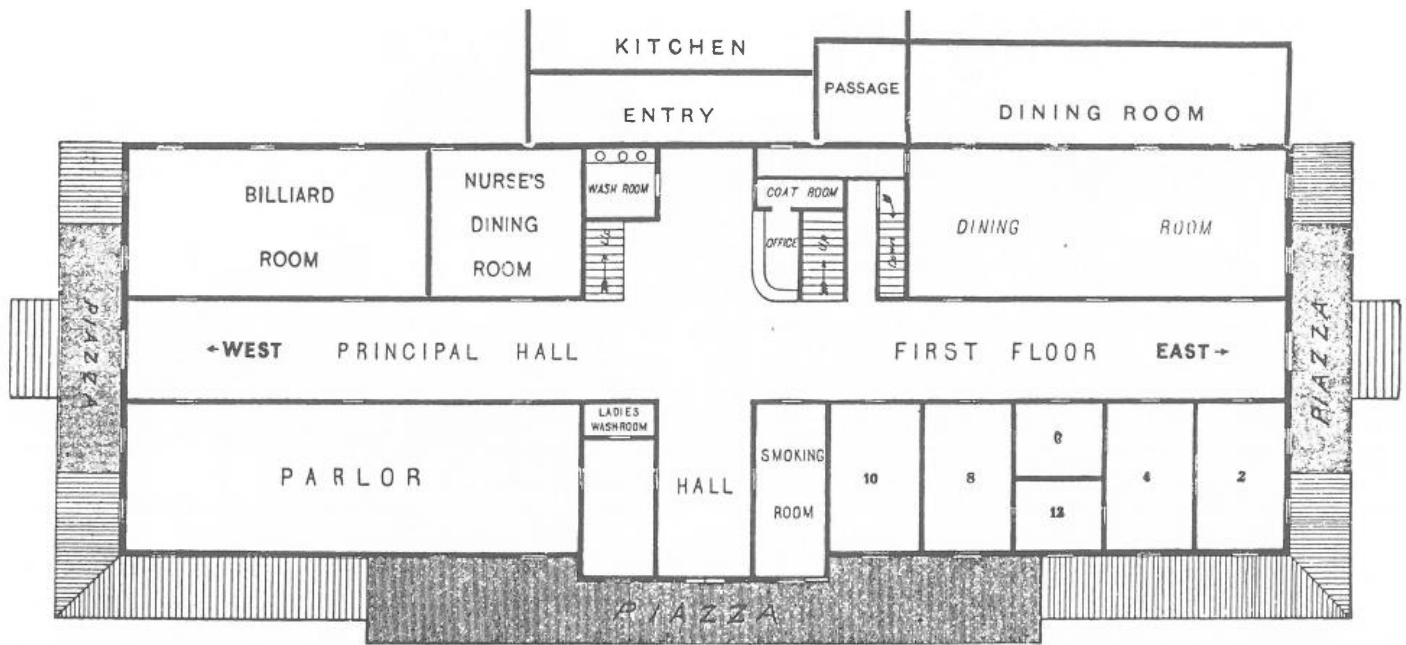


Figure 4. First Floor Plan, Wassaumkeag Hotel (Photo MHPC).

NOTES

- ¹ The following sources provide biographical information about Thompson: Faustina Hichborn and Herbert C. Libby, *Historical Sketch of Stockton Springs*, Waterville: Central Maine Publishing Co., 1908, pp. 98-99. Alice V. Ellis, *The Story of Stockton Springs, Maine*, Stockton Springs: Historical Committee, 1963, p. 186. Letter from Alice V. Ellis to Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., February 11, 1974, Thompson file, Maine Historic Preservation Commission, Augusta.
- ² *Progressive Age*, Belfast, December 20, 1860. An account of the construction of the Ship Garibaldi notes that Thompson provided the finish work for the cabin.
- ³ The design and construction of Israel Washburn, Sr.'s house is documented in detail in the Norlands Journal, a manuscript chronicle of events on the estate kept by

various members of the family. The Journal is in the collection of the Washburn Norlands Foundation. This collection also contains Thompson's bills for the project.

- ⁴ Ellis, Stockton Springs, pp. 186-188. *Republican Journal*, Belfast, March 16, 1871; April 6, 1871; June 16, 1898.
- ⁵ *Republican Journal*, February 2, 1871.
- ⁶ *Republican Journal*, February 5, 1891.

List of Known Commissions in Maine by Joseph W. Thompson

Israel Washburn, Sr., House, Norlands, Livermore, 1867, Extant.
Wassaumkeag Hotel, Fort Point, Stockton Springs, 1871, Destroyed.

Photograph of Joseph W. Thompson
Courtesy of James B. Vickery

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